



## Reflections for Holy Week, April 2021

### *Self-Giving Love and Submission – The Only Way to True Freedom*

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

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[Mark 11:1-11](#)

[Philippians 2:5-11](#)

[Mark 14:1-15:47](#)

Friends, welcome to Holy Week. This is the heart of the Christian journey. Because, it is the heart of the journey of Christ. And it is not an easy journey. We join Jesus on the road. We join Jesus on the road to the cross. We join Jesus on the road to what at first looks like an entry into triumph and grand glory, as he is hailed as the celebrity of the moment, the new promising candidate, the messiah of the day. And then, within less than a week, we see all things change.

We know something of sudden change, and our fear of it. For all of us, life is full of change – little changes and big changes. While this last year has been unlike anything we have experienced in our lifetimes, we have weathered and been challenged by other things as a people. And, there are other long ongoing traumas that people in this nation and world live with and suffer with, day after day.

Life is uncertain. To tell ourselves differently is to spin a lie. But, we grasp desperately at certainty. We grasp at what seems like the solution of the moment, or the release from the moment. Because it's hard for us to live in more than the moment.

If anything should strike home for us from the experience of Palm Sunday, it's that we as human beings are a fickle people. We say one thing with what we feel is deep conviction in one moment, and then turn and say another. We praise someone, and then turn and cut them down – or, the other way around! We feel and allow ourselves to be pulled in one direction, and then have new feelings and new tugs in another direction.

And that is the life of the crowd, this crowd that hails “Hosanna to the King! Hosanna to the Son of David!” for the One who enters the city on a donkey and not on a war horse – and then that cries “Crucify him! Release for us Barabbas, the robber, the zealot, the insurrectionist. Release for us Barabbas, and crucify Jesus.”

And this fickleness is fueled by the false information of religious leaders ardently defending their own way and twisting and distorting Jesus' words and motives. “He casts out Beelzebub by Beelzebub's power.”

This fickleness is fueled by the disinterest of the empire to the unhappy conditions of people day to day, the empire that washes its hands of its own decisions. And this fickleness is fueled by the whispering in the ear, the ever-whispering tug of mutated values and justifications that surround us and shape our thoughts.

This is what we have watched in our country, as we have been given a relatively simple set of tasks to which we can adhere during this pandemic. To wear a mask, keep some distance, adjust our

social behavior for a time, and live with the hunger for what we have given up for a time. But then, there is the whispering in the ear, that it somehow violates freedom to comply with these simple tasks. I have heard evangelical and fundamentalist religious leaders in this region speak of civic and healthcare leaders during this pandemic as “dictators,” immediately evoking a frontier-spirit of hostile resistance to anything that might intrude on personal freedom.

Let’s be clear. Following Jesus is living life in a covenant with God. A close covenant with God. An intimate, direct relationship with God which becomes more central than all other relationships in our lives. And following Jesus is giving myself to that relationship – and because I give myself to that relationship, I give myself to what God gives himself to. And what God gives himself to is ALL of humanity, ALL of creation. God give’s God’s own self away – continuously. So, following Jesus is following one who gave himself completely away – and following Jesus is giving ourselves up to God’s transforming touch in our lives, so that we learn how to love so much that we give ourselves away.

We do not preach “freedom.” We preach love.

We do not preach freedom. We preach submission to the will of God and the love of God.

Because, ironically, it is in accepting the self-sacrificing love of God and in giving ourselves away in love to God and others that we find true freedom.

Don’t get me wrong. Freedom is a wonderful thing! Jesus himself said he came to fulfill the prophetic words of Isaiah, to bring sight to the blind and proclaim freedom to the captives, and to let the oppressed go free.

But freedom is also seductive in its allure. We find people defending freedom to choose whatever might be, because it is their God-given right to choose. The first, most common-use definitions in the dictionary are “the power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants without hindrance or restraint,” and “the absence of subjection,” before we even get to the definition that fits more closely with the biblical idea of freedom: “the state of not being enslaved or imprisoned.”

I have heard a great deal in this region and from different places in this country about a kind of freedom that seems more in line with the first two definitions – to do and say and act as I please, and to not have to answer to or be subject to anyone. Is this really the kind of freedom we seek, and that some of our brethren in this region dare to preach? As if this was the greatest and highest good for all humanity?

Yes, God made us with freedom of choice. But, if we read the account of scripture, we will find again and again that this gift of freedom is what we continue to abuse. Because the choices are not simply between one good and another equal good. We encounter those choices often in our life – Do I want an apple or an orange? Will I have yogurt or milk and cereal today? – if I have those kinds of choices available to me in my life. But no, the deeper freedom of choice is to move toward what we are called to be and created to be, or toward an easier, cheaper way that maybe feels more authentic because it’s out of our “real” gut feelings or the passion of the moment, but is twisted and wrong because it violates our covenant with others – our relationship with others, our care for one another. And so, those twisted choices that follow our own self-centered ambition for freedom from any obligation to others that might constrain us or slow us down, those choices ironically enslave us to ourselves as tyrannical masters.

What is freedom for, that Jesus brings? This freedom that Jesus brings, on this way of the cross, is freedom from the bonds of sin and death. Freedom from the twists and distortions and lies that we tell ourselves, that we have been told, that grip us with their constant whispers. Freedom from the bonds of seduction that would enslave us. Jesus delivers us into freedom from these bonds of sin – and from the fear of death, because death is not the final answer.

But this freedom is not freedom from others. This freedom Jesus brings us is not freedom *from* others, it is freedom *for* others. We are free to be *for* others.

We are freed from distraction. Pay attention to the one that is on the road to the cross. Follow him. Watch him crucified. Do not give into the distraction of surrounding crowds or the twitters and hungers of the moment. Watch him die. See him buried. And wait. Pay attention. Give up the distractions.

Give up the distractions as you give yourself to others – just as Jesus did for us and for the whole world.

Many of you know this kind of giving of yourself for others. Many of you know this freedom that is something you never would have wanted or accepted or pursued on your own – in the choices you have made in marriage, in the realities (not the choices, but the realities) given to you in the children you have had, in the parents you have cared for, in the neighbors you have lived by and cared for, in watching out for your comrades in military service and medical care and work. And so you give up a piece of your time, a piece of your treasure, a piece of your own commitments and dreams and ambitions for the sake of others. Moment by moment, day by day, year by year.

Jesus frees us from the tyranny of self from self-absorption, from utter dedication to our own “rights.” Jesus invites us into submission to him – to take his yoke upon ourselves, to follow him, and in the process to be freed from the fickle confusion and whirlwind of desires and passions that we have grown attached to and thing we are entitled to, that get in the way of our freedom of care for others. We are set free to attend to the rights and dignities of others, and to the care of others health in body, mind, and spirit.

We are not free on our own, ever. And in the Church, we are not individuals just bouncing into a space to exalt in our own personal freedom. We are a people in covenant together, following the Savior and Redeemer of the world who has saved us and continues to save us from our own individual folly.

We wear masks, even now as our north Idaho health district has released the mask mandate that was not being followed anyway. We do this in community, and in conformity, with the larger community of Episcopal Christians that we are a part of – in this diocese and across this country. We do this as a measure of disciplined care for others around us. And we recognize that individual choice is one of things we yield up as Christians, because we give ourselves to one another.

And let’s be clear. Wearing a mask is so little in comparison to taking up a cross. But small acts are one of the ways we learn and prepare for the greater acts – and faithfulness in small things prepares us for faithfulness in greater things. We are a people of covenant. Jesus says, “Come follow me. Take up your cross.”

Jesus shows us the way in which God lives. God, the ultimate free being – the First Mover, the One who is the Source of all things and set all things in motion, and so was free to act from the very beginning. God, who chose knowing full well that, once freedom was given to created beings, things could go horribly awry, chose out of love to bring into being what was not yet being, and has never ceased to love. And so God puts us and all creation above God's own self. We find this selflessness in God pouring out God's own self in creating and calling all things into being. We find this continuing self-giving in the life, suffering, and death of Jesus who is Emmanuel, God-with-us, the self-emptying One – who begged to have this cup pass from him and still moved forward to crucifixion and death.

I hear a lot of mythology out there about the Christian faith. The Christian life is one of dedication and embrace, a whole way of being, knowing that we have been given this gift – and so we rise with joy knowing we have been set free from the bonds of sin and death, free from selfishness and enslavement to ourselves, free to take up Christ's yoke, free to be for others. It is by way of suffering and self-giving that this freedom came to us. That's the path. It may not seem very manly. But if you're man enough, woman enough, if you're courageous enough – and certainly, even if you're not, because God gives us the strength we do not have within ourselves – you will find incredible adventure and a kind of freedom you never imagined, never asked for, may have wished to flee, that opens a completely new understanding of life and its purpose.

Come, follow Jesus. Follow deeply and closely this week – on the way of the cross, on the way to resurrection and unimaginable new life. It begins now.